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PRIORITY THEMES

DEVELOPMENT: INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT; WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

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1. The Bahá'í International Community is pleased to take this opportunity to address the role of women in development, particularly the crucial role women will play, in partnership with men, in creating and implementing a sustainable pattern of development.

2. The concept of sustainable development has emerged largely in response to a growing disillusionment with the prevalent development models and an increasing collaboration between three great forward-looking movements: peace, the environment and women's emancipation. A crucial element common to all three movements is the significant role played by women. For decades, development planners neglected the needs of women, paid scant attention to the deterioration of the environment and failed to discern the connection between development and peace. As a result, development failed. The convergence of these movements has amplified women's voices and strengthened their call for a sustainable future for their children and their children's children. As women help to redefine development, planners are beginning to take a more holistic approach.

3. One way in which women are redefining development is by undertaking their own projects. The 1991 Global Assembly of Women and the Environment: "Partners in Life", sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), highlighted an incredible diversity of such projects. UNEP invited representatives of both Governments and non-governmental organizations to

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Miami, Florida, to confer with 215 women who had initiated successful environment projects in communities all over the world. These women, many of them faced daily with the responsibility for protecting the health of their families and feeding them, took action within the spheres of influence traditionally open to women. They designed smokeless stoves, solar cookers and solar greenhouses, cleaned up local water supplies, altered farming methods and successfully cultivated degraded lands given up for lost. Others influenced policy- and decision-making in realms not usually considered the province of women. They reformed local and national sewer systems, recycled highly toxic used motor oil, and obliged powerful industrial concerns to reduce scandalously high levels of lead and cadmium emissions. The projects - some carried out at the grass roots by ordinary citizens, others initiated at the highest levels - offer affordable, repeatable and sustainable solutions to problems common throughout the world.

4. Women are also redefining development through their work with non-governmental organizations. Immediately after the UNEP-sponsored Global Assembly, non-governmental organizations sponsored the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, also at Miami. Over 1,500 women and men from more than 75 countries, both individuals and representatives of a broad range of non-governmental organizations, heard testimony and engaged in a spirited exchange of views on a variety of environment-related topics. The Declaration made at the close of the Congress offered to the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil three guiding principles for inclusion in its proposed "Earth Charter": (a) global equity, giving priority to meeting the basic human needs of all people; (b) resource ethics, calling for sustainable use of natural resources and responsibility towards future generations; and (c) empowerment of women at all levels to contribute to the achievement of the principles of equity, social justice and ethics.

5. The world is in desperate need of the ingenuity, good sense, determination and compassion exhibited by the women selected by UNEP. As evidence of the failure of current development strategies mounts, it is becoming increasingly obvious that women's talents and capacities are being underutilized. Imagine the benefits that could accrue to families, communities and the world if women were educated and fully involved in decision-making and policy-making at every level of society.

6. Full participation by both women and men is a goal of Bahá'í development. The New Era Development Institute, Bahá'í institution in Panchgani, India, conducts an extensive regional development programme. While the Institute conducts some programmes aimed mainly at women, it would be misleading to assume that other activities do not incorporate women-related issues in their planning or implementation. The concept of the empowerment and development of women is intrinsic in the goals and all operational objectives of the Institute. The Institute's approach to its activities is integrated, not vertical or compartmentalized, thus ensuring that the development and training needs of women are systematically fused into all training and field application processes, including health education, afforestation, adult literacy, rural technology, animal husbandry and rural schools.

7. This inclusive, integrated approach to development derives from the conviction that no development effort will succeed without unity. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, over 100 years ago: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless

and until its unity is firmly established". Guided by this principle, Bahá'í communities have evolved an approach to development which is unifying, participatory, sustainable and replicable. Beginning with a shared vision for the future, Bahá'ís seek practical ways to implement the principles that will bring about willing cooperation between women and men and among the nations, races, creeds and classes of the human family.

8. One way Bahá'ís include women is through consultation. Whatever the specific differences between successful Bahá'í projects, all rely on consultation at every stage to ensure full participation at the grass-roots level and relevance to local needs. Furthermore, they look to elected local and national Bahá'í councils - consultative decision-making bodies on which both women and men serve - to guide and sustain development activities.

9. One Bahá'í project, aimed at changing the community's perception of women, is using traditional media, such as music, dance and theatre, to stimulate village-wide discussion of women's roles. Launched in three countries - Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia - by the Bahá'í International Community with assistance from the United Nations Development Fund for Women, this project is unique in its attempt to draw men into consultation about issues affecting women's status. Folk media were chosen because of their capacity to engage both men and women, literate and non-literate, in consultation. The hope is that out of these community consultations will come a commitment on the part of both men and women to redefine village and community priorities.

10. To ensure that these discussions promote unity, the community is taught the consultative process: to define the problem, to gather the facts, to identify relevant principles, to speak frankly and to listen to one another respectfully. This process allows the community to explore important questions together, with open minds and hearts, and encourages communication on how to apply in their own lives such principles as the equality between men and women. Through consultation, men are allowed to realize for themselves that inequality truly exists. For example, in one village the men and the women were each asked to complete a list of their daily tasks and then to exchange lists. The men were shocked and embarrassed at the uneven division of labour. They saw, for the first time, how holding uncritically to traditional roles, roles that limit the actions of both men and women, causes the entire community to suffer. By discussing realities such as these in a rational, non-threatening manner, men are also able to see how creating a more just balance between women and men enhances, rather than diminishes, men's role in society. Having identified arenas for change, the community can make plans to implement those changes with support from the local governing council.

11. The reliance on consultation to bring everyone into the change process, makes the Bahá'í approach to development replicable anywhere. Already two more national Bahá'í communities, Nigeria and Brazil, have asked to participate in the traditional media project at their own expense. This willingness to engage in the admittedly difficult process of personal and social transformation is typical of Bahá'í communities. It is rooted in the commitment to unity and the understanding that, in order to progress, women must be included as full and equal partners in all fields of human endeavour.

12. Partnership calls for changes by both women and men. Women need to develop their own capacities and step forward to play an active role in solving the world's problems. Men, for their part, must learn to cooperate

with women and encourage their efforts. When men actively promote the principle of equality, women will no longer have to struggle for their rights. Gradually, Bahá'ís believe, both women and men will discard long-held unhealthy attitudes and progressively incorporate into their lives the values conducive to true unity, without which an environmentally sustainable civilization will be impossible.